



**“Know that I am with you always;
yes, to the end of time”**

(Mt. 28:20)

**FEAST
of the
SACRED HEART OF JESUS
2005**

SOCIETA DEL SACRO CUORE – CASA GENERALIZIA

Rome, 3 June 2005

My dear Sisters,

It is a joy for me to be in touch with you once again as we approach the celebration of the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a moment of re-committing ourselves to follow him wherever he leads us. As always, I have the whole Society in my consciousness as I write to you, and it is always a challenge to communicate something that will speak to everyone.

This has been a particularly eventful year in our Church. It is the **“Year of the Eucharist”** which began with the World Eucharistic Congress last October in Guadalajara, Mexico and whose celebration will culminate in October 2005 with the next ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome on the theme “The Eucharist, font and culmination of the life and mission of the Church.” Although for most people the Congress and the Synod are events more to be read about than to participate in, **the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II and the subsequent conclave, election and installation of Pope Benedict XVI** engaged the whole world, at least vicariously, through the extensive coverage of the media.

I was in Washington, D.C. at the moment of Pope John Paul’s death, and in my little hermitage in Wales when our new pope was elected, arriving back in Rome just two days before the installation Mass. Having been out of Rome for those events, I had a desire to experience being in the midst of the People of God, and so I was one of the 350,000 people who came to St. Peter’s square for the inauguration of the new pontificate. Like many of you, I had been surprised by the rapid election of this 78-year old man, and found myself full of questions and a mixture of emotions. As I listened to his homily, in which he described his service as that of the successor of Peter the fisherman, I thought of Sophie and of her faith in a Church that was often a source of personal suffering. **I asked her to give me and the Society that same faith that this new moment in the Church is part of a plan hidden in the Heart of God; and I heard deep within me Jesus’ words “Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.”** (Mt. 28:20)

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Several days later, I came upon some words of Cardinal François Xavier Nguyễn Van Thuân, former President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace. A man who spent thirteen years in a Communist prison in Vietnam, nine of those in solitary confinement, he was interviewed in March 2000 as he was about to give the Lenten retreat to the “papal household”. His words struck a chord in me:

“I have a dream of a Church that is a Holy Door, which embraces everyone, which is full of compassion and understanding for all the sufferings of humanity. I have a dream of a Church that is bread, Eucharist, that wishes to be a gift and allows itself to be consumed by all, so that the world will have life in abundance. I have a dream of a Church that carries in its heart the fire of the Holy Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is liberty, sincere dialogue with the world, discernment of the signs of our times.”¹

Three days later, during the last day of the retreat he said:

“I see the Holy See with all its institutions as a great host, one bread offered as a spiritual sacrifice; as a great Cenacle inside the Church, with Mary, the mother of the Body of Christ, and with Peter, exercising his ministry of unity and service for all. And together we are all like grains of wheat allowing ourselves to be ground by the demands of communion, in order to form all together one body, in solidarity and completely given as bread of life for the world, as a sign of hope for humanity.”²

I cite these words, because one cannot speak of Church without speaking of Eucharist, and for many months I have felt a desire to make Eucharist the subject of this year’s letter. I am well aware that I am not a theologian or a biblicist, and I do not pretend to write a treatise on Eucharist. Rather, the words of Peter and John before the crippled beggar in the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles seem appropriate: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you.” (Acts 3:6) “What I have” I offer you as one sister to another: an abiding question about **how we are understanding and living Eucharist in the Society and what we can do to share that with one another.**

The 1994 Chapter text on the “Eucharistic Dimension of our Spirituality” remains the Society’s most recent attempt to articulate the place of Eucharist in our lives, and they have been a source of inspiration and nourishment for RSCJs and others who resonate with our charism. I think we tend to focus on the poetic body of the text and perhaps have forgotten the paragraphs at the end that are a reflection on the *process of writing* the text. Today, eleven years later, our experience still resonates with that of the Chapter delegates: an experience that was at once faithful and questioning, painful and hopeful. They said:

“Reflecting on our spirituality has been a process in which we have shared moments of joy and pain, of certainty and doubt.

We have known the joy of rediscovering the Eucharistic dimension of our spirituality as it energises our life and mission. At the same time, we have painfully recalled the scandal of worship without justice, division among Churches, laws and traditions which cause suffering and even exclusion, as well as our own differences of understanding and living Eucharist.

This experience has been a gift even though the journey has been difficult and uncertain.

The words of the Risen Christ to the Emmaus disciples: ‘Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into glory?’ (Lk 24:26) both enlighten and strengthen us, reminding us that our faith is permeated by the paschal mystery.

¹ 12 March 2000 interview by ZENIT. Cardinal Van Thuân died in Rome on 16 Sept. 2002

² 15 March 2000, cited in “Eucharist 2004-2005: The peace that the world hopes for”, JPIC, Rome

This is an **invitation** to continue traveling the road together, as Society, sharing our experience of Eucharist with one another, allowing our charism to continue to unify our lives and sustain our hope.”³

My question is: **have we responded to that invitation?** Although I have no sure answer, my sense is that Eucharist is not something that we talk about very easily. In some places it is even a “taboo” subject. Why are we so reticent? Perhaps it is because the mystery of the Eucharist is so multi-faceted, and our experience so diverse, that there is no “common ground”. The more I think about this, the more I think that the struggle at the 1994 Chapter to write something on Eucharist, as well as the subsequent struggle to write something on our Spirituality at the 2000 Chapter, is rooted in a combination of **a mystery for which there are no adequate words, differences of generation/formation, a variety of both “understanding” and “practice” in the various cultures where the Society is rooted, and a lived experience that goes beyond cult or “sacrament”**.

Like Moses before the burning bush, I feel like taking off my shoes before each cultural expression, each deeply held individual belief and practice. At the same time, I think you can understand why I approach this topic with some trepidation... Let me give you some examples of the differences that exist among us. They are not exhaustive but give some idea of our diversity.

- There are many in the Society for whom daily Eucharist is an integral part of their day. They look upon it as having infinite value regardless of the worthiness of the priest or how it is celebrated. It is our “daily bread”. On the other hand, there are those who value *quality* of celebration over *quantity*. I have heard it said: “If, like the early Christians who ‘gathered on the first day of the week’, I really enter into the Sunday Eucharist, I cannot do the same every day.” Still others have no choice. There is no priest available every Sunday, much less every weekday. Let me say here that I am aware of many instances where Eucharist is celebrated daily within our own communities with a fervor that gives meaning to what could become routine. I have also witnessed the care with which we help one another to pray, with or without a priest.
- There are those for whom their local parish is their Eucharistic community and they find it nourishing. To others, their local parish is lifeless: poor homilies, a non-cohesive community, or a priest disconnected from the people.
- I know that there are those for whom patriarchy, women’s role in the Church is not an issue. Others feel such alienation because of the marginalization of women or because they have been so demoralized by the scandals of pedophilia and sexual abuse by clergy that they cannot worship in a Church setting.
- In some countries (particularly under atheistic Communist regimes) *participation* in the Eucharist was an act of protest against an unjust government, an act of solidarity with people who were being treated unjustly. In others, *non-participation* in the Eucharist is an act of protest against a patriarchal Church that denies women equality and the use of their ministerial gifts. Both attitudes come from a desire to act justly.

As we journey together as a Society, how do we address such differences in a spirit of openness and trust? I had an insight into this when I was in Berkeley, California in February, and was invited to a lecture by a well-known Taiwanese Protestant theologian, Choan-Seng (C.S.) Song. The lecture was part of a series entitled “Reading of the Sacred Texts” and the speakers are invited because of a particular connection to a “sacred text”, written or oral, traditional or new, within a canon of scriptures or drawn from outside a religious tradition. The title of Dr. Song’s talk was “*In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts*”.

³ General Chapter 1994, p. 29

For me, that was an “Aha!” moment and I thought “Let us share our stories!” **Let us get in touch with our own “Eucharistic histories”, share our own Eucharistic stories.** Rather than beginning from theory or whatever theology we happen to embrace, **let us begin from our experience:** significant moments, doubts, difficulties, shifts in our understanding and sacramental practice, “where we are now”. Some of us have walked a straight road from childhood. Others have known mountains and valleys. Some of us are converts to Catholicism, perhaps the only Catholic in the family. Others may be the only practicing Catholic. Some of us live in secularized cultures; some in “sacralized” cultures. Some live in cultures evangelized by a Western theology/missiology and are only beginning to discover the God of their ancestors. Some have lived more than half their life prior to the Council. Others have no experience of a “pre-Vatican II” Church.

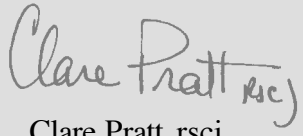
I think that if we did that kind of sharing the “silence would be broken” and we would have much more respect for each one’s journey, more facility in asking the questions that linger in our hearts about Eucharist, about the Church, about the future of religious life. I suspect that very few of us “have it all together”. We are searching, trying to act with integrity according to our insight and understanding and the concrete situation in which we find ourselves.

But the dialogue I am inviting you to do goes beyond the life stories and differences I have mentioned above, because there is an indissoluble connection between sacramental celebration and pouring out one’s life for others. (Oscar Romero’s murder while celebrating the Eucharist is a potent symbol of this reality and how fitting it was that the 25th anniversary of his martyrdom this year should fall on Holy Thursday!) **Let us share other stories, parables, poems, artistic creations that will help us to allow the whole of our lives to become Eucharist:** “breaking the bread of the Word” as we listen and respond to that Word spoken through Scripture, events, one another; taking on Jesus’ attitudes of hospitality in sharing meals with friends, sinners, and even enemies; allowing ourselves to BE Body of Christ for others - washing feet, healing wounds, listening...; believing that where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus He is present - in sharing the daily life and struggles of our brothers and sisters, as well as in sacramental celebrations.

At the end of this letter, as a kind of “annex”, **I offer you a Eucharistic parable as a first contribution to a dialogue of stories that I hope will continue and multiply.** We have so much to learn from the experience of others, beginning with that of our own sisters!

This year’s readings for the Feast (Dt. 7:6-11, 1 Jn. 4:7-16 and Mt. 11:25-30) remind us of **the utter gratuitousness of God’s love for us.** As we renew our vows, may our hearts be filled with tremendous gratitude for that love that has been poured out on the Society. Let us remember each one of our sisters, each Province, District and Area and the particular moment each one is living. Let us thank God for the miracle of our union -our communion- given the great diversity of our ages and cultures. It is a gift of God. Let us not take it for granted but deliberately do all that we can to strengthen and deepen it, confident in the One who invites us to learn the gentleness and humility of his Heart.

With grateful love to each one,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Clare Pratt rscj". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Clare Pratt, rscj
Superior General

A Eucharistic Parable⁴

Everywhere is holy ground. Any one of us can walk upon that holy ground if we allow ourselves to be open.

I know something about that. For me the streets of Chicago, which I was called to walk, became holy ground. However, in response to this call to minister with women in prostitution, I was frequently terrified. I was always vulnerable. But I carried within me a deep and profound certainty that flowed from a personal mystical experience that God had called me to be on those streets. For me, regardless of perceived or imagined danger or risk, I knew without a doubt that I had to follow that call. It was simply greater than any fear or obstacle before me. I was also driven by an overwhelming sense of compassion that, in reflection, I know to be God. The mystical experience, beyond any human rationalization, drives one into strange and awesome places. No matter how cold or grey or forbidding the space, it is the territory of the Holy Spirit. In this process of revelation, trust and vulnerability are prerequisite.

So it was that when I came to a run-down tavern on the corner of a dark alley, I knew without a doubt that I had to go in, that that was where I was supposed to be. Inside it was dark - but I could feel the bodies jostling around the bar counter. I felt utterly alone in that dirty place and yet, paradoxically, utterly at home, simply because it was the right place for me to be at that time. It is amazing the grace that becomes available to us when we follow the deep truth (God) within us. We dare tread in unknown places when, for whatever mysterious reason, we believe God walks before us making all space holy.

As I sat on a bar stool in the dim light late that night, a woman in her mid-fifties shuffled up to the bar and struggled onto the stool next to me. Banging her fist on the counter she demanded a “jug o’ wine” from the bar man. Eventually she glanced at me. “You hungry?” she demanded.

Anxious to be receptive, I replied that, yes, I was - a little. With great satisfaction the woman bent down and pulled a loaf of white sliced bread from her plastic bag on the ground. “Good,” she proclaimed, “I ain’t eaten for three days and I just stole this loaf o’ bread from the supermarket down the street and I was looking for someone to share it with.”

I stared in amazement. But more surprises were to come. After opening the loaf and taking out a couple of slices of bread, she bent down again and from her bag she produced, triumphantly, an open can of tuna fish wrapped in plastic. She then proceeded to scoop out the tuna with her hand and spread it on the bread producing a soggy sandwich that she then offered to me with a great smile: “Here you are, honey,” she declared. Having safely deposited the sandwich in my hands, she then proceeded to fill up my then-empty glass from her “jug.” I found myself in one of those unreal situations that somehow impel you, nevertheless, to participate. As I looked at my new-found companion I experienced a stirring of compassion from somewhere quite deep in me. This woman, for all her strange behavior, was my sister.

As I tentatively ate and drank, the woman talked - or, rather, rambled, something to the effect of it being a hard life and how it was a struggle to get by and to survive. She lamented that she could only “pick up \$5 or \$10 a day” and that she did not know what she was going to do. Tears began to roll down her face as she looked at me again... and then again. Suddenly it seemed as if she had an inspiration, for she grabbed at my arm as she looked me up and down and then blurted out: “Oh, honey, I know where the tricks are. With my experience and your body, we could work together - we could be a team...” Then I realized, to my horror, that this woman was an older prostitute and that times were hard for her now - and she was asking ME to team up with her! Almost apologetically I explained that I was not involved in prostitution.

“What are you doing here, then?” she demanded. “This is a hooker bar - this is where the guys come to pick up a girl. Who are you?” I stumbled my words: “I’m a Christian... I’m

⁴ Taken from a Reflection by Edwina Gateley in *Christ in the Margins*, Orbis Books, 2003

a... an independent Catholic minister...”

“A what?” she cried out in disbelief. “Ain’t never been no minister in ‘ere before. This ain’t no place for no minister ain’t no place for no Christian. You shouldn’t be here... ain’t no place for people like you...” The presence of someone who simply believed in God and claimed it triggered an emotional response in my new-found companion. She began to weep steadily as she told me her life story - of how, after years of incest and abuse as a child she ran away from home when she was a teenager, was soon picked up by a pimp on the streets, introduced to drugs, and soon primed for a life of prostitution. It was all she had ever done. And now she was too old for it all and moving rapidly into the lifestyle of a bag lady. Now she was totally alone and desperate. All I could do in that bar that night was hold that broken woman who had told her story of violence and poverty to a stranger. And so we clung together in that dirty place two women weeping and looking for a dream.

Early the following morning I left the bar feeling all emptied out and helpless. The woman with whom I had spent the last three hours lay huddled in a corner fast asleep - her face still damp with tears. Walking home in the greasy darkness of wet streets, I reflected on what had happened. As I did so, it was as if a blindfold suddenly slipped from my eyes and I pierced the veil from ordinary consciousness to a deeper place: I had gone into the bar - vulnerable, open, and looking for God. And this woman had come into the dark place in which I had found myself. She brought the bread - and she broke it and shared it with me. She brought the fish and she shared it with me. Then she took the wine and she shared that with me too. And then she told me her story and she embraced me. Then I knew. I knew with a deep and transforming insight that there had been, in that dirty place that night, a eucharist, and that the Holy Spirit - Wisdom- ever elusive, ever roaming free, had been present in the coming together of open hearts seeking compassion and grasping at connections right in the heart of brokenness and vulnerability. God did not need a church or recognized holy places to be present. Rather, the ordinary place, two women, stolen bread, cheap wine, and fish became the place of mystical encounter.

For me, this was a mystical experience, an experience of one-ness in God and of the mystery of God’s presence totally gratuitous, breaking through in a moment of faith. As such it is an invitation to a divine rendezvous. When such invitations impel us to open our hearts and our arms, we cannot but be overwhelmed. We cannot but be amazed at God - with us and in us. We cannot but be deeply grateful to sink, even for a moment, into the vision of God.